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FORT NIobrARA GAME PRESERVE, NEBRASKA

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Location and Purpose

The Fort Niobrara Game Preserve is located in the sand-hill region in north-central Cherry County, Nebr., near the town of Valentine, on what was formerly the Fort Niobrara Military Reservation. It is maintained primarily for the perpetuation of bison, or buffalo, and other species of North American big-game animals, but it is also a bird refuge. All species of wild animals and birds are protected there, except when it is necessary to control the injurious activities of predators and rodents. The Niobrara River, a wide, shallow, and rapidly-flowing stream, traverses the entire width of the preserve, dividing it into two parts. The part lying north of the river and comprising about a third of the preserve, is an irregular tableland cut by canyons, ravines, and creeks; that south of the river consists of rolling sandhills, about half as high as the tableland to the north. It is a favorable range for buffalo, elk, and deer, as well as a haven for prairie chickens, sharp-tailed grouse, and other species of upland game birds. The administration buildings are located 5 miles east of Valentine, on State Highway No. 7. The resident agent in charge is Geno A. Amundson, whose post office address is Valentine, Nebr.

Establishment

The Fort Niobrara Military Reservation, containing about 55,000 acres, was established in 1879 to keep the Sioux Indians on their reservations in nearby South Dakota and to control the operations of cattle rustlers and horse thieves. The fort was abandoned as a military post on October 22, 1906, but was retained by the War Department as a remount station. In 1907, the desirability of establishing a bird refuge on the area was called to the attention of William Dutcher, then president of the National Association of Audubon Societies; and G. L. Carter, at that time chief deputy game warden of Nebraska, was likewise greatly interested in protecting the birds. As the reservation was still retained by the War Department, plans for establishing the bird refuge could not then be carried out. On January 17, 1908, Mr. Dutcher wrote to President Theodore Roosevelt concerning the desirability of protecting the birds and game on the military reservation. At the direction of the President, the chief quartermaster of the Army on March 5, 1908, issued an order prohibiting all shooting and trapping on the area.

The War Department completely abandoned the reservation in 1911, and in that year a representative of the Biological Survey inspected the area to determine its suitability for a bird refuge. As a result, about 13,500 acres of the former military reservation were set aside by Executive order of January 11, 1912, and were placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of Agriculture as a refuge and breeding ground for native birds.

Early in 1912, J. W. Gilbert, owner of a private game park at Friend, Nebr., offered his buffalo, elk, and deer to the Federal Government for preservation on a national reservation, with the understanding that they would remain in Nebraska. The acceptance of this offer was delayed through lack of a suitable range in the State. On November 14, 1912, however, an Executive order was issued enlarging the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve (then known as the Niobrara Reservation) by adding thereto the area formerly used as the parade grounds and as headquarters for the old military post. This made the total area of the preserve about 14,200 acres. Mr. Gilbert's offer was then formally accepted by the Secretary of Agriculture, and arrangements were made to transfer the animals to Fort Niobrara.

As no appropriation was available for fencing the preserve, the citizens of Valentine generously offered to help. They were desirous of having the game preserve established in their vicinity to compensate for the loss sustained by the community through the abandonment of the military post. Funds for constructing a big-game fence to enclose a 213-acre pasture were therefore raised through contributions by the citizens of Valentine, the Chicago & Northwestern Railroad Company, and the National Association of Audubon Societies.

In January 1913, the enclosure was ready for the animals, and 6 buffalo, 17 elk, and 2 white-tailed deer were transferred to it. During the time that elapsed between Mr. Gilbert's offer to donate the animals

and their acceptance by the Government, he had arranged to otherwise dispose of several buffalo and elk, and it was not possible to capture a couple of the elk or most of the deer. In June 1913, 2 buffalo bulls were transferred to Fort Niobrara Preserve from Yellowstone National Park.

A third Executive order, issued March 31, 1920, added to the preserve a strip of about 640 acres lying along the Niobrara River to the west of the lands originally set aside, and some 555 acres of privately owned lands within the exterior boundaries of the preserve were purchased in 1931-32 under specific appropriation from Congress. During 1935 and 1936 approximately 3,100 acres, purchased through the Resettlement Administration and from other funds, were added by Executive order of February 21, 1936. The total area of the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve is now 18,537 acres.

Big-Game Animals

The buffalo and elk increased rapidly and, as on other similarly enclosed big-game preserves administered by the Biological Survey, it has been necessary from time to time to control the numbers in the herds to prevent overstocking the range and the consequent destruction of forage. Numerous buffalo and elk have been removed, and as far as possible they have been used for stocking other preserves or for breeding or exhibition purposes. Some have been sold for butchering or have been donated to the Indian Service for use as meat by needy Indians on nearby reservations.

The herds of big-game animals on this preserve are, therefore, not large, since restricted grazing areas and range conditions have made it necessary to curtail their numbers. The herds are in good condition, however, and are of much educational value and interest to tourists as well as to local residents and serve to assist in perpetuating interesting forms of native wildlife.

A few deer have been purchased or donated to the preserve from time to time, and some fawns have been born, but the deaths have about offset the births, and at present few deer are on the area.

An interesting instance of comradeship between animals of different species was observed on the Fort Niobrara Preserve. A male white-tailed deer, obtained from the park at Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1934, and a black saddle horse were kept in the same pasture. They developed a marked fondness for each other and romped together over the pasture, attracting much notice. Their friendship ended tragically, however, in the winter of 1936-37, when the deer died from injuries received in an encounter with a buffalo that he had tried to chase from the pasture, where a few yearling buffalo were held awaiting disposal as surplus animals and several others had been placed for exhibition.

In 1924, a small band of 10 antelope, brought from Nevada, was placed in a restricted enclosure near headquarters. Owing to lack of

adequate pasture, the antelope did not increase satisfactorily, and after reaching the maximum number of 17 in 1932, the band steadily decreased. The last members either died from natural causes or were killed by coyotes during the winter of 1936-37.

About 8,000 acres in the southern part of the preserve, which was considered well suited to maintain antelope under restricted range conditions, were enclosed with a big-game fence. The topography is varied, including plains and rolling sand hills covered with wild prairie grasses, weeds, plum thickets, hackberries, and other shrubs. In the spring of 1936, 34 young antelope, picked up soon after birth on their fawning grounds in South Dakota and Wyoming, were transported to this new pasture, some of them coming from a distant point in Wyoming by airplane. Every effort was made to rear them, and every means possible was taken to safeguard them, but they gradually succumbed to disease or were killed by coyotes. There are no antelope on the preserve now, but attempts will probably be made to establish another herd.

The big-game animals on the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve in April 1938 included 108 buffalo, 27 elk, 7 white-tailed deer, and 5 mule deer.

Texas Longhorns

In May 1936, 6 Texas longhorns were transferred from the Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Okla., to the Fort Niobrara Preserve, and in the following spring each of the four 3-year-old heifers gave birth to a sturdy calf. Although the Texas longhorn cannot be classed as a game animal, the species, now rapidly disappearing, is of much interest, because it is so closely associated with the early history of the West. It is, therefore, desirable that its perpetuation be assured.

Smaller Mammals

Many smaller mammals, all native to the region, are found on the Fort Niobrara Preserve. Among these are the beaver, muskrat, mink, civet cat, weasel, raccoon, skunk, opossum, red squirrel, coyote, and bobcat. Sometimes a white porcupine is seen.

Birds

The principal birds occurring on the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve throughout the year are sharp-tailed grouse, quail, prairie chickens, upland plover, and Chinese pheasants. A large number of insectivorous and song birds nest within the boundaries, and golden and bald eagles frequent the area in winter. Considerable numbers of waterfowl rest on the waters within the preserve during migration, and many mallards winter there. About 250 species of birds have been recorded on the preserve.

Improvements

The big-game animals soon taxed the capacity both of the original pasture fenced in 1912 and of the 230-acre pasture enclosed in 1918, so that it became necessary to provide additional range. Under funds appropriated by Congress, a 4,500-acre pasture on the north side of the Niobrara River was fenced in 1923. Funds from the appropriation for the relief of unemployment were allotted in 1931 for the improvement of the preserve, and, after the purchase of some 555 acres of privately owned lands within the boundaries, a big-game pasture containing 2,500 acres between the highway and the south side of the river was fenced. This pasture made it possible to build corals for use in handling the animals and in obtaining them for breeding and exhibition purposes. Previously it had been necessary to butcher all surplus animals removed from the herds. The animals in the new south pasture can be seen from the highway and are much more accessible to the public. The buffalo and elk are transferred to this pasture each fall and winter, and a few are also maintained in exhibition pastures near headquarters.

Emergency funds also made possible the construction of a modern administration building.

Civilian Conservation Corps camps maintained on the Fort Niobrara Preserve during the third, fifth, sixth, and seventh camp periods carried out extensive developments and improvements. Many miles of truck and horse trails were built, a 255-foot steel and concrete bridge with a 10-foot roadway was constructed across the Niobrara River at a favorable site east of headquarters, and 26 dams were built on small spring-fed creeks, creating ponds for water conservation and resting places for waterfowl and other migratory birds. Aquatic plants that furnish the most suitable food for ducks have been planted in them. Several ponds were enclosed with "vermin"-proof fences and others with stock-proof fences. Numerous plots within the fenced areas on the preserve are annually planted with various grains for the production of food and cover for wildlife.

Miscellaneous Features

Within the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve are three beautiful waterfalls formed by spring-fed creeks dropping over brule clay cliffs, through which the Niobrara River has cut its channel. The spray created by these falls of crystal-clear water keeps the surrounding air cool and fresh during the hottest days of summer. Horseshoe bends with vertical cliffs approximately 100 feet high occur at several places along the course of the river, and on the south side where sloping sand hills intersect the brule clay, spring water seeps and trickles over the cliffs. During the winter, at one such place, a vertical sheet of ice in horseshoe shape is formed, presenting a striking scene. Both deciduous and coniferous trees grow along the river and creeks, furnishing contrasts in various shades of green; and south of the river on the hills that are covered with birch, elm, cedar, and western yellow pine, these contrasts are especially noticeable.

Most of the preserve is accessible by automobile or horse, and the big-game animals have become so accustomed to the proximity of visitors with cars and horses that they can be viewed at close range without being disturbed.

The museum located at headquarters contains collections of specimens of wildlife, plants, and fossils found on the preserve. Two fossil beds of the lower Pliocene and the upper Miocene periods, from which the skeletons and fragments of bones of more than 20 extinct species of animals have been collected, are located on the preserve. Among these specimens are bones of the three-toed horse and of extinct forms of the antelope, rhinoceros, elephant, and camel. R. S. Stirton, professor of paleontology at the University of California, cooperated in collecting, classifying, preserving, and arranging the fossil exhibit. Specimens of about 75 varieties of plants have been collected with the aid of Professor Tolstead of the University of Iowa.

Other Areas Maintained Primarily for Big-Game Animals

Fort Niobrara is one of 11 game preserves and ranges (described in mimeographed leaflet BS-95) maintained by the Biological Survey primarily for North American big-game animals, but on which all wild animals and birds are protected, except predators and rodents when it becomes necessary to control their injurious activities. The other 10 areas, the first 3 of which, as well as Fort Niobrara, are enclosed with big-game fences, are as follows:

National Bison Range, Mont.--The principal species on this range are buffalo, elk, bighorn (mountain sheep), mule deer (sometimes called black-tailed deer), and white-tailed deer.

Wichita Mountains Wildlife Refuge, Okla.--On this refuge are herds of buffalo, elk, Texas longhorns, and numerous white-tailed deer.

Sullys Hill Game Preserve, N. Dak.--Buffalo, elk, and white-tailed deer are maintained on this preserve. (Described in mimeographed leaflet BS-61)

Elk Refuge, Wyo.--This is a winter feeding ground for the elk of the Southern Yellowstone herd.

Charles Sheldon Antelope Refuge, Nev.--In addition to antelope, this refuge supports numerous mule deer.

Charles Sheldon Antelope Range, Nev.--Although chiefly an antelope range, considerable numbers of mule deer also are found here.

Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge, Oreg.--Maintained primarily for antelope, this refuge is inhabited also by mule deer.

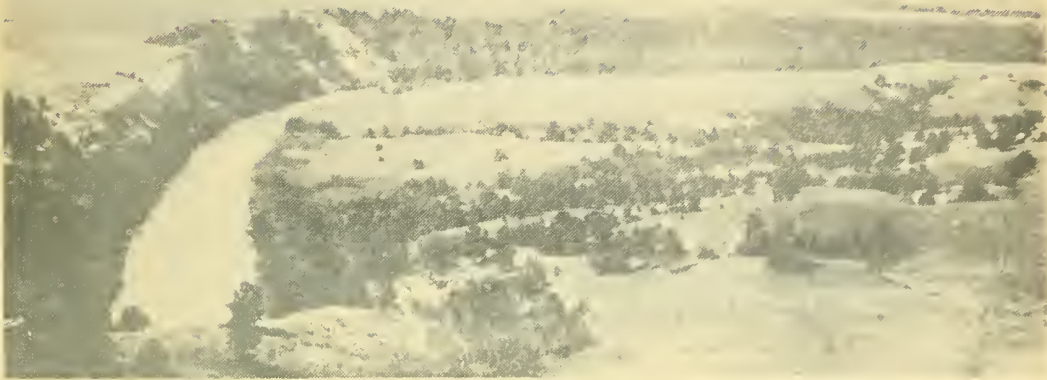
Desert Game Range, Nev.--The principal species on this range is Nelson's, or desert, bighorn. Other species are mule deer and elk.

Fort Peck Game Range, Mont.--White-tailed and mule deer and some antelope frequent this area.

Munivak Island Wildlife Refuge, Alaska.--On this refuge are musk oxen, caribou, and reindeer; also foxes and other fur-bearing animals.

The sage grouse, or sage hen, a species that has been fast disappearing, occurs on the Charles Sheldon Antelope Refuge and the Charles Sheldon Antelope Range, Nev., as well as on the Hart Mountain Antelope Refuge, Oreg., and the Elk Refuge, Wyo. The protection afforded this species on these refuges should result in its increase and restoration.

Wildlife and Federal property on the big-game preserves and ranges are protected by Federal laws and regulations. Copies may be obtained from the Bureau of Biological Survey, Washington, D. C.



View on the Fort Niobrara Game Preserve, Nebraska, looking
over the south bluff of the Niobrara River



Herd of buffalo at natural wallow on the Fort Niobrara Game
Preserve, Nebraska



Two majestic bull elk on the range in north pasture
Fort Niobrara Game Preserve, Nebraska



Herd of elk in south
pasture at head-
quarters, Fort Nio-
brara Game Preserve,
Nebraska



One of the progeny of
antelope introduced
in 1924 on the Fort
Niobrara Game Pre-
serve, Nebraska



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